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## THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE MISSIONS.

BY WILLIAM L. JUDSON.

One of the most precious bequests which any age can leave to its successors is the charm of its own characteristic spirit. One of the most valued possessions of any age is the flavor of the traditions and the relics of bygone times telling their story of struggle and conquest, of decay, of defeat, of peace and war, of the evolution of a people, of a culture, of an epoch.

For two generations the old missions of California have moaned to the desert breezes the pathetic tale of defeat, disaster, and of a noble purpose almost carried to its fulfillment through the incredible sacrifices of a half century of heroic struggle.

Fifteen years ago California was dotted at intervals with the ruined witnesses to the self-devotion of the mission fathers. For fifteen years, and probably longer, there has gone up a chronic wail that the old missions were passing away. Fire or decay or the necessities of neighbors had destroyed the wooden portions of the unprotected buildings. Roofs had consequently disappeared, and the soluble and friable adobe walls were exposed to the disintegrating action of summer sun and winter rain. In many cases the imperfectly burned bricks of columns and arches had disintegrated until they seemed almost ready to fall of their own weight. The picture was saddening, as ruin and decay must always be, but it was unspeakably picturesque.

The few artists who had the privilege of seeing the missions in that state revelled in their romantic beauty, and, happily, many beautiful transcriptions were made and still exist to prove the truth of these words.

The picturesque beauty of the old missions was passing. Alas! it has passed. What the elements had spared, the restorer has finished.

Henry Sandham, the Boston artist, illustrated Helen Hunt Jackson's book on Father Junipero and his work, in which he vividly indicates the beauty and dignity and the elaborate intricacy of plan and design, as well as the weird picturesqueness of the ruin. I mention this book merely to contrast it with a recent one in which the illustrations are made from photographs, "The Missions of California," by Jesse S. Hildrup.

Here we have the same mission buildings, newly shingled, plastered, painted, perky, neat, comfortable, modern houses. Truly, the old missions are passing; many of them have passed.

The architecture of the California missions has exercised a singular and potent influence on the architectural composition of our time. It is not to be wondered at that the builders of California should adopt and adapt a mode of expression so well suited to the climate and landscape of this southwestern coast, but it is a little singular that its fascination should lay hold of the architects of the cloudy and humid East. The influence of the beautiful mission architecture has been such that it may truly be said to have been the origin of a new and distinct style, if not an order of architecture. The Fathers builded wiser than they knew. Everywhere nowadays we see in domestic, civic and ecclesiastic buildings traces of mission influence. The complicated curving parapet or gable; the generous, wide-spreading, cloistered corridor; the patio; the small-domed, square tower; the embrasure-like arched windows so largely adopted in eastern and even in European plans, are all features borrowed from the missions. And while we contemplate this welcome addition to the art knowledge of the world, it is interesting to trace the sources through which the friars received their ideal.

Undoubtedly the first attempts at formal architecture in Spanish-America were a reflex of the debased renaissance then in vogue in Spain. The simple pedimented form of the Greek temple had been modified to meet the requirements of Christian worship. A belfry had been added in the shape of a square tower on one side, and later on each side of the facade. The dome with which it was crowned was a concession to climate and to architectural effect. In the case of the missions it was easier to cover a small space with a dome of bricks made on the spot than to carry timbers on human shoulders a distance of ten to fifty miles from the mountains; and the dome form, while adding an element of variety and grace to the design, was better adapted to a warm and rainless land than either the hip roof or the spire.

When we question the stones themselves for information, we find the most surprising discrepancy between the mature completeness of the plan and the execution of the detail.

I have not been able to find any record of, or even an allusion to the origin of the plan of the buildings, but the maturity of design, the richness of elaboration in the plan, and the adaptation of parts to each other and to their uses seem convincing evidence that master minds and experienced hands first conceived and drew the plans.

It is more reasonable to believe that these plans were brought ready made from Spain or Mexico than that the priests themselves were trained architects. Even then we have to credit the fathers with an almost supernatural knowledge of building, for there is

no record of skilled artists in the outfit. And there were bricks and tiles to be moulded and fired, difficult and complicated blacksmithing to be done, lime to be quarried and burned, and plaster to be made and applied. There were bricks to be laid, sometimes in beautiful and complicated forms; and, most difficult of all, there were arches to be built, elliptical and circular, and these sometimes occurring side by side in the same wall. There was much woodwork, requiring an intimate knowledge of carpentry, and there was stone masonry and stone carving in cornices and mouldings which would do credit to the advanced knowledge and appliances of our own time.

Doubtless the actual labor presented no problem. The Indian converts in great numbers worked industriously, if not willingly, without payment or reward. There are evidences in all the missions of the barbaric taste in ornament in decoration, and of the untrained hands of the neophyte. The record of the Indian could not be eliminated.

With all this, even supposing that the retinue may have embraced a number of expert workmen, there still remains a great wonder how and by whom these remarkable works were directed.

In the San Carlos Mission at Carmel Bay there was a remarkable piece of engineering in the walls and roof of the main building. The roof was doubtless originally of tile supported by poles laid on wooden rafters. The remarkable thing about it is that this customary arrangement was reinforced with nerves or groins of stone; that is, narrow arches, a single stone in width spanning the nave from side to side. This daring device is an adaptation from the Gothic style, and proves an intimate knowledge of the resources of art in the builder. In fact, it is scarcely possible that the roof could have been so planned by an architect who could not possibly foresee the conditions under which the work must be done. In order to give further stability to the heavy roof, instead of using corbels, as in the Gothic, the inner surface of the massive walls were curved inward at the top, giving an air of exceeding grace to the general effect. The tall elliptical form of its domes also adds an element of grace to the exterior which makes them unique in California. This arrangement is clearly shown by Henry Sandham in the drawings already alluded to.

This same Mission of San Carlos was not only a gem among the missions, but was a remarkable work of art in itself, one which would command the attention of architects anywhere in the civilized world for its simple dignity, for its mass and line, for the perfect proportion of its parts and the beauty of its contours.

I speak in the past tense because the restorer has got in his deadly work since I first saw it. Recent photographs show that

it has been plastered, painted and crowned with a high pitched roof of shingles utterly out of proportion with the buildings and out of harmony with the climate and spirit of California.

These criticisms are made, not in a spirit of blame or fault-finding, but rather in a spirit of regret for the necessity of so great a sacrifice of beauty to utility.

The most elaborate of the California missions was doubtless San Juan Capistrano. Happily, there are a few fragments still remaining to prove what a beautiful and imposing structure it must have been when the seven domes of its great nave were still intact; with its long lines of carved cornices and sculptured pilasters, its multiple arched shrines and niches, and its walls glowing with barbaric design and color. One of the most interesting architectural features of this mission is the stone carving, some of which is still in place and seems to have been done after the masonry was in place. Certain sandstones and some limestones are quite soft when first quarried and may be chiseled and carved readily.

Fifteen years ago, in the glory of its ruin, its great enclosure was an entrancing picture, with its old olive mill, its infinite lines of arches with their floors of square bricks, its red-tiled roofs and quaint terra cotta chimneys.

Time is the great beautifier, the master painter. It will be many long years before the restorations will blend and seem to belong to their place as a part of the story of the past.

Although the mission buildings differ widely in treatment and detail, there is a general family resemblance as if they had been designed by a single mind; usually the facade of a central romanesque pedimented gable with pilasters supporting the pediment, with a square tower or belfry pierced with romanesque windows flanking each side, the arched entrance in the center being usually surmounted by a square projecting cornice. Sometimes one of the towers has been omitted, as at Santa Inez; sometimes partly missing, as at San Luis Rey, or wholly missing, as at San Gabriel, where the entire facade has been destroyed.

In some cases the gable is treated as a parapet, with complicated lines and this is one of the features seized upon as characteristic in adapting this style to modern uses. The excessive massiveness of the walls which so excites the wonder of the tourist is difficult to account for, unless they were so built to counteract the effect of the frequent temblors of those early days.

During the fifty or sixty years of neglect and decay which the missions suffered, one only seems to have preserved its original appearance. Santa Barbara, one of the richest and most extensive, perhaps owing to the proximity of an important city, has been, at least in part, fairly well preserved. A visit to the belfry and an outlook over the roofs will give the visitor a good idea of the

massive construction and the strange mixture of materials used in the building. It is an example of mission architecture exemplary of what may be considered as the central type. The huge fountain in front of the building, clumsy and crude in execution, has still a certain dignity and grace of form, the one quality speaking for its aboriginal and unskilled builders, the other for the cultured mind of its designer.

While none of the California missions can vie with those of Arizona and Texas in point of magnificence of design or in the barbaric splendor and richness of ornamentation, the most notable buildings, like San Luis Rey, the richest of them all, San Juan Capistrano, Santa Barbara, San Carlos, etc., all possess some architectural qualities, like size, beauty of design, intricacy of plan or ingenuity of construction, which must excite admiration and wonder.

On the other hand, some of the mission buildings, like Santa Inez and San Miguel, are conventional and common-place. Still others are mere collections of adobe huts with no pretensions to architecture. There is one redeeming instance in this latter class, however, pathetic in its silent testimony to a desire for beauty amid surroundings of squalor and poverty; this is the belfry of Pala, an isolated bit of brick and stone masonry pierced by two arches, one above the other. It is perfect in its outline and having the crowning quality of artisanship, a perfect adaptability to its use.

Another instance which seems to me a pathetic misdirection of worthy intention is in the facade of San Francisco de Asis, where massive pillars of noble proportions are superimposed in a manner opposed to all the laws of art, beauty, good taste and gravity.

Father Junipero Serra was the moving spirit in the founding and building of the nine principal missions of the south, and, so far as we know, no other force was pervasive enough to impress a style on all this work. It is probable, then, that, although the plans may have been drawn by other hands, the directing mind was that of this remarkable man, and although this fact is not mentioned in the books, it is very reasonable that to his many other great qualities the gift of artistic insight was added, if not the accomplishment of architectural training.